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UNITED STATES PATENT APPLICATION

FOR

**NETWORKED COMPUTER SYSTEM FOR COMMUNICATING AND OPERATING IN
A VIRTUAL REALITY ENVIRONMENT**

INVENTORS:

ADA MAE EDECKER,

ANATOLY SYOMIK

AND

ALEX SIYANKO

Prepared by:
Bell, Boyd & Lloyd LLC
70 West Madison Street
Suite 3300
Chicago, Illinois 60602
(312) 372-1121
Our File No.: 0112463-003

NETWORKED COMPUTER SYSTEM FOR COMMUNICATING AND OPERATING IN A VIRTUAL REALITY ENVIRONMENT

5 The present invention generally relates to interactive networked computer systems and in particular to networked computer systems which enable a plurality of users to communicate and operate within the same virtual reality environment.

In recent years virtual reality technology has been generally known and utilized to implement computer interfaces for certain computer software applications such as computer games and other Internet and World Wide Web applications. However, there exists a continuing need to provide users with integrated, interactive, easy-to-use, creative and highly personalized virtual reality computer environments which may be utilized as high-level user interfaces for various personal and collaborative tasks.

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global communication network. The interactions between remote server and client computers are carried out by TCP/IP protocol. Under this protocol, the client computers have the required and appropriate client software installed and running before they interact or communicate with the server. In general, all static data for providing the virtual environment is stored locally on the client computer. The locally stored data includes, for example, graphics, three dimensional object models and the client software. Such data architecture enables a relatively large number of participants to act and communicate simultaneously in a virtual reality environment since the amount of data transferred over the Internet during network sessions is significantly reduced. However, the centralized hosting model significantly restricts the user's possible actions within such virtual environments because such publicly hosted virtual environments cannot be effectively modified by users according to their personal and specific needs.

The success of virtual reality technology also has impacted change on the World Wide Web ("Web") which is a widely used communication and information resource network that is built on or over the Internet infrastructure. Users access the Web with the assistance of software programs, usually called Web browsers, which in turn communicate with remotely hosted Web server software by high level HTTP communication protocol. This protocol uses Internet TCP/IP as an underlying transport protocol.

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5 The Web includes conventional web sites such as flat or
two-dimensional pages containing text and pictures as provided by Web
browsers, and a growing number of virtual reality capable Web sites (also
known as Virtual Worlds). Such virtual reality environments are typically
described by Virtual Reality Markup Language ("VRML"). VRML data files
are stored at Web servers and then downloaded and interpreted by Web
browsers similar to regular HTML documents. Additional functionality for
VRML environments, as in the case with HTML, is provided by Web browser
scripting capabilities. The disadvantages of such Web-based virtual reality
10 environments are, for example, the stateless model, relatively low graphic
quality and the lack of interactivity due to certain restrictions of known Web
technology.

For example, certain Virtual World data is stored remotely and
generally must be downloaded to a client computer each time a user
15 accesses a web server. The amount of such data cannot be substantial due
to the typically low speed of data transfer over the Internet. This significantly
restricts graphics quality, since graphic textures are required to remain small
and simple in order to be effectively compressed and transmitted. The same
is true for other data components of Virtual Worlds such as VRML files and
20 supporting scripts.

In addition, users have no ability to modify such Virtual World
environments in a persistent or consistent manner since all changes are

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usually restricted to a session scope and not stored permanently. As a
result, Virtual Worlds on the Web, in most cases, are relatively small and
have poor functionality and therefore are not being optimally utilized.
Existing Virtual Worlds on the Web cannot represent or reflect the reality of
changes to an environment.

Known virtual reality technology has also gained popularity in other
computer software applications such as organizing user data. Several
computer software applications such as virtual desktop extenders and virtual
desktops are commercially available. These applications utilize 3D
environments to store and manage user files and programs. Such desktops
are implemented as graphic shells over an underlying file system and
typically provide computer file resources within some pre-defined 3D virtual
workspace. They can also allow an "in-place" preview of selected World
Wide Web contents without leaving the 3D environment, such as launching a
stand-alone Web browser application. Unlike the previously discussed
Internet-based applications (i.e., publicly shared virtual reality environments)
virtual desktops represent a class of personal, locally stored and hosted
virtual reality environments which do not provide user-to-user interaction
within a public virtual reality environment.

Known planning and design programs also utilize virtual reality
interfaces, for example, for interior as well as landscape planning and design.

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However, their functionality is generally limited to navigation and controlling movement/predesignated graphics viewed on a computer screen.

5 A problem with implementing networked virtual reality computer environments relates to the existing communication methods between online users in the virtual reality environments. Known multi-user virtual reality communication applications use publicly shared three-dimensional environments as a communication media and are traditionally implemented on a client-server platform. Within this architectural framework, virtual environments are hosted on a dedicated central server wherein users access and connect to the server as clients and represent themselves within the environment as animated characters or avatars. An example of such a network is disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 5,956,038.

10 Communication between users within such environments requires the corresponding central virtual reality server to be up and running and to have sufficient capacity to handle such communications. Moreover, for security reasons, users typically have restricted access rights to remotely hosted virtual environments wherein the session participants do not have complete control over the access rights, such as rights to add or remove objects, run applications or other like access rights. For example, in existing public chat portals, typical actions are restricted to user avatar movements and chat function. This significantly restricts user capability to share visual and other information during a communication session since the content and

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functionality of centrally hosted virtual reality environments is not capable of providing all possible needs or goals of each particular session.

Another problem with existing networked virtual computer environments relates to data traffic limitations in publicly shared virtual reality environments. When utilizing a conventional dedicated central server, there is a limit to the number of users that can concurrently access the server. This limit exists both for the server and the clients and depends on the network connection bandwidth. The amount of data transferred between the server and a particular client is also proportional to the number of all connected clients. For the server, this amount is proportional to the square of this number. As the number of users increases, the rate of data transmission can be effectively decreased. In addition, an increased number of users can also result in a situation where new users may not be able to access the shared or public virtual environment.

In many cases, however, users access the public virtual reality environments to only communicate with other known users, for example, users on a personal contact list. In addition, certain users access public virtual reality environments to perform certain personal tasks and not to communicate with other users. For example, users can visit a number of public virtual environments, such as virtual shops, libraries or the like, analogous to how users can visit different Internet locations during conventional Web page browsing.

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A further problem with existing networked virtual reality environments relates to how users can move from one virtual reality environment to the next. The process of user transition from one virtual reality environment to another is referred to as a "teleportation." In general, this process is implemented by utilizing hyperlinks, destination lists and direct user input. During teleportation, the user typically remains idle and, in fact, beyond connection to any virtual environment. In other words, teleportation, as generally known and used, does not provide continuous networked communication. In addition, known teleportation may require substantial time depending on the network connection bandwidth and the amount of data to be transferred to a client computer. Moreover, teleportation is typically applied to one particular user at a time, that is, it does not support joint and synchronous transition of several users from one virtual environment to another.

The present invention recognizes the above-described problems and the overall need to provide users with an integrated, easy-to-use, creative and highly personalized virtual reality computer environment and accordingly recognizes a need for a virtual reality computer environment with the capabilities, for example, to effectively represent and manage computer informational resources, to establish interactive network communication and to simulate and control external environments.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention solves the above problems by providing networked computer systems that facilitate communication and operation in a virtual reality environment. The virtual reality environment provides three dimensional objects to
5 work and operate computer files and applications in place of two dimensional icons associated with conventional two dimensional graphical user interfaces. By utilizing objects, a user and in particular an inexperienced user, can more easily and understandably operate a computer to, for example, communicate with other users.

The virtual reality environment can include a variety of different
10 environments that each contain a number of different objects. For example, one virtual reality environment provided by the present invention includes a virtual reality home environment. The user can create, customize and use (to a certain extent) objects for its virtual reality home environment in a similar manner that the user creates, customizes and uses such object in the user's everyday home
15 environment. These objects are recognizable and familiar to the user which facilitates ease of operation within the virtual reality environment. For instance, if a user wants to turn on a light in the environment, the user moves the light switch on a wall in the virtual reality home environment from the "off" position to the "on" position. Moreover, these objects associated with the virtual home environment can
20 be remotely utilized to control and operate a variety of objects of an actual home environment, such as a thermostat, lights, electric appliances and other like devices.

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By utilizing the virtual reality environment of the present invention, such as the virtual reality home environment, users can share the same virtual reality environment and can effectively communicate and interact with one another to the extent that it appears or feels as if they were actually meeting in person or in the same room or other physical location provided by the virtual reality environment. For example, other users of the environment can visit a certain user's home environment to interact by, for example, conversing, playing a game, listening to music, or other like communication medium.

To effectively operate and communicate within a virtual reality environment, the present invention includes a computer network infrastructure. The network infrastructure preferably includes a number of interconnected hosts and servers. Each host can include one or more virtual reality environments which users can locate and access through servers connected to or communicating with the hosts. The hosts and their users are preferably located via the servers by a number of different operations, such as through the visit user home mode and follow user mode described below. Certain servers also function to regulate and control communication or network traffic between hosts. This can be done, for example, by uni-cast messaging and multi-cast messaging as described below.

Once the host is located and accessed, the virtual reality environment(s) associated with the host can be run in an active mode and/or a passive mode. In the active mode, server host and connected client hosts are in continuous network connection with one another. This enables server hosts to control and update any

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changes that are made to the virtual reality environment associated with these
hosts. In the passive mode, network connection between server host and
connected client hosts is terminated once a copy of the virtual reality environment is
transmitted to a client. This enables users to create independent user groups for
5 sharing different and independent copies of a virtual reality environment. By
providing such groups, the amount of transmitted data and the network space over
which the data is transmitted is effectively minimized. The virtual reality
environment can be shared by the users associated with a user group independent
of a dedicated server. This enhances communication and operation in the virtual
10 reality environment by, for example, increasing interactivity, graphics, and the rate
at which data is transmitted.

The networked virtual reality environment of the present invention can also
be utilized to provide teleportation for a user or a group of users including
continuous network communication. This facilitates communication and interaction
15 between users when performing certain collaborative tasks or for gaining immediate
access to particular virtual environments. Examples of such continuous group
travel scenarios include, but are not limited to, virtual guided tours or group access
to restricted virtual environments under the control of an authorized person.

It is therefore an advantage of the present invention to provide virtual reality
20 computer networked systems to facilitate communication and operation within a
virtual reality environment.

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Other objects, features and advantages of the present invention will be apparent from the following detailed disclosure, taken in conjunction with the accompanying sheets of drawings, wherein like numerals refer to like parts, components, processes and steps.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating the virtual reality environment network infrastructure of one embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 2 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating a host registration in
5 accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 3 is a table illustrating example data of a session server database identifying a number of registered hosts of one embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 4 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating the network hierarchy of
10 name servers and session servers of one embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 5 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating the virtual reality environment network executing multi-cast messaging and uni-cast messaging of one embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 6a, 6b and 6c are diagrammatic representations illustrating dynamic host
15 roaming processes during the establishment of network communication sessions between hosts;

Fig. 7 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating host name aliasing operations of one embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 8 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating the host system software
20 architecture of one embodiment of the present invention;

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Figs. 9a and 9b are diagrammatic representations illustrating client mode;

Fig. 10 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating a host acting in both client mode and server mode;

5 Figs. 11a, 11b, 11c and 11d are diagrammatic representations illustrating examples of network communication sessions between hosts in active mode;

Fig. 12 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating the "Visit User Home" mode of one embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 13 is diagrammatic representation illustrating the "Follow User" mode of one embodiment of the present invention;

10 Fig. 14 is diagrammatic representation illustrating symmetric channel communication;

Fig. 15 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating teleportation provided by one embodiment of the present invention;

15 Fig. 16 is a diagrammatic representation of teleportation illustrating virtual travel between an entry point and a clone entry point;

Fig. 17 is a diagrammatic representation illustrating a teleportation control panel;

Figs. 18a to 18f are diagrammatic representations illustrating a variety of teleportation control panel displays; and

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Figs. 19a to 19c are diagrammatic representations illustrating host network communication during group teleportation.

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DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides networked computer systems that facilitate communication and operation within a virtual reality environment. The virtual reality environment replaces two dimensional icons, such those associated with
5 conventional two dimensional graphical user interfaces, with three dimensional objects to work and operate computer files and applications. By utilizing three dimensional objects, a user and particularly an inexperienced computer user, can more easily and understandably use and operate a computer to communicate with other users and perform other tasks.

10 It should be appreciated that the virtual reality environment of the present invention can include a variety of different environments that each have a number of different objects. For example, one virtual reality environment of the present invention includes a home environment. The user can create, customize and use its virtual reality home environment in a similar manner that it can change the
15 surroundings in the user's home. The customized virtual reality home environment is more recognizable and familiar to the user than a conventional two dimensional graphical user interface. This facilitates the user's ability to use and operate a computer.

20 By utilizing one of the virtual reality environments adapted to be provided by the present invention, such as the home environment, users can share the same virtual reality environment and can effectively communicate and interact with one another to the extent that it is as if they were actually meeting in person. For

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example, users can visit a certain user's home environment to interact by, for example, conversing, playing a game, performing collaborative work, listening to music or other like communication medium. It should be appreciated that while a home environment is used herein to describe the present invention, the present
5 invention is adapted to provide any environment such as a work or office environment, an exercise or sports environment, a meeting environment, learning environments such as classrooms, libraries and laboratories, shopping environments such as virtual shopping malls and entertainment or gaming environments such as virtual attractions, amusement parks and virtual reality
10 games.

Referring now to the Figures, to facilitate effective communication and operation within a virtual reality environment, such as a home environment, one embodiment of the present invention provides a networked computer systems or a computer network architecture or infrastructure 10 generally illustrated in Fig. 1.
15 This infrastructure 10 includes a variety of different components such as hosts 12 and servers 14 that provide users 16 with the ability to locate, access, activate and operate within virtual reality environments associated with the hosts 12. Various components of this embodiment of the network infrastructure of the present invention are discussed below.

20 A central component of the infrastructure are the hosts 12. In one embodiment of the present invention, such host 12 is a computer (discussed in greater detail below) adapted to run the application(s), module(s), program(s) or

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other suitable software for enabling the host to operate in a virtual reality environment. Users 16 respectively access hosts 12 to function and operate within the virtual reality environment and to communicate with other users 16 via the network 17. A user 16 can access a host either locally at that host (i.e., local user) 5 or remotely through another host (i.e., remote user). A local user generally includes a user who accesses or logs into a local host and physically operates the local host computer. A remote user includes a user who accesses a remote host and physically operates the remote host to establish network communication sessions with a local host. It should be appreciated that a user 16 generally includes a person 10 or a computer program that functions within the virtual reality environment associated with a certain host or hosts.

In order to facilitate network connections between hosts, the hosts are uniquely identified by a registration process. During the registration process, the host is assigned a unique identifier, such as a host identifier ("host ID"). With a 15 unique identifier, the host can be easily located within the networked computer system of the present invention.

The host is assigned its host identifier by a session server 18 (i.e., a home session server) which stores this information along with other informational data associated with that host. For example, the home session server also includes 20 information relating to the owner of the host, such as the owner identification ("owner ID"). Each registered host in the system of the present invention has an owner, namely a registered user of the system.

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The registered user, like the registered host, has a unique identifier, such as a user identifier ("user ID"). The user ID information is also stored by the respective home session server 18. If the host ID is the same as the owner ID for a particular host, the host is referred to as a primary host of the registered user. However,
5 users can own additional or secondary hosts.

The present invention preferably enables host owner to implement access restrictions to limit and control access of its host. The access restrictions can be applied in any suitable way, such as to hosted virtual reality environments, particular areas within such environments, available operations over objects or classes of
10 objects, access time for certain users and categories, groups or lists of users and other hosts who have access rights to the host.

For example, the access restrictions can prevent anonymous users (i.e., those users who have logged onto the network with a user ID that corresponds to a specified "anonymous" value associated with the access restriction) from accessing
15 the owner's host or any virtual reality environment in such host. Access restrictions can be further utilized to specify how to access a host (i.e., local or remote access) and to designate certain remote hosts from which a user(s) can only access the owner's host. Although the owner of a host always has full local access to its host, it can restrict or even remove its own remote access to such host for security
20 reasons.

Thus, it should be appreciated that the present invention is not limited to registered hosts and registered users. Users and hosts can be anonymous.

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Anonymous users do not have a unique identifier. This situation occurs when a user ID or other user identifier is not required to log into or access a host. For example, a public computer host or terminal, such as a public computer terminal located at an airport, may not require a user ID for the log in procedure or process.

5 This enables anonymous users to run a certain application in a virtual reality environment associated with the terminal without having to perform any formal log in procedures. This essentially provides unrestricted access to the public terminal for purposes of, for example, finding a specified location within the airport or other like public venue, such as a shopping mall.

10 An anonymous host may have a unique identifier assigned to it. This identifier may be temporary and may change each time a network connection is made via the anonymous host. This situation is similar to the TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) dynamic IP addressing scheme which dynamically assigns IP addresses to Internet **[services]** that have a dial-up Internet
15 connection. In general, anonymous hosts cannot be accessed directly from other remote hosts except if a "Follow User" mode is utilized to locate a certain user as described in more detail below.

There are several reasons why anonymous hosts are utilized by the present invention. Such hosts may be typically used to provide remote access to, for
20 example, public virtual reality terminals as discussed above. Such hosts can conserve server disk space because its home session server does not store permanent registration data. Such hosts provide a higher level of security in one

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direction since anonymous hosts cannot, in general, be directly accessed from other remote hosts. Such hosts are better suited for mobile or portable computers or access devices.

Dynamic roaming procedures are more typically and frequently utilized by
5 mobile or portable computers in order to provide network access or connection. An anonymous host's dynamic roaming procedures are generally faster than a registered host's roaming procedures. Unlike the registered host, the anonymous host has no permanent home session server. Therefore, the anonymous host is not required to contact and/or notify a home session server each time the anonymous
10 host changes connections to some other session server, namely, a session server that is currently nearest to it. For registered hosts, home session server notification is mandatory because it gives other users the opportunity to locate such a host on the network.

In addition, the anonymous host cannot participate in network expansions
15 because it does not have a permanent host ID which may be subject to change during, for example, host name aliasing as described in detail below. Although an anonymous host does not have a permanent identifier, it preferably has an owner (i.e., a registered or anonymous user). This is necessary to provide the owner with privileged and unlimited access to the host in order to, for example, create, delete or
20 modify virtual environments on the host, determine security and privacy rules associated with other users and perform other like procedures.

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As further illustrated in Fig. 1, the computer network system 10 provides various servers through which registration, location and access of hosts 12 can be established. In general, a server of the present invention includes a database that stores data associated with the hosts and a processor adapted to access such database and transmit such data. For example, the present invention preferably includes name servers 20, such as child name servers and a root name server, data servers 21 and session servers 18 which store and transmit data associated with hosts 12 and users 16. This data is utilized to register, locate and access hosts 12.

As previously discussed, each host 12 is assigned to a home session server 18 during the registration process. An example of a host registration process is performed as follows and illustrated in Fig. 2. The host 12 has a software installation program which is adopted to establish a network connection between the host 12 and the root name server 21a. The host 12 sends a "find nearest session server" request to this server 21a as shown in callout 1 of block 21b. The root name server 21a prompts the host 12 for further information, such as a current IP address, physical location, telephone numbers and other information which may be used to better locate the home session server associated with this host 12.

As further illustrated in Fig. 2, the root name server sends a "calculate logical distance" request (as shown at callout 2 of block 21c) to each of its child name servers 21d and session servers (not shown). This provides the child servers 21d with information regarding the host 12 associated with the previous step in the registration process. Each child server 21d returns to the parent server 21a the

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calculated logical distance between that server 21d and the host 12. When a reply
is received from each of the child servers 21d, the root name server 21a selects the
server 21d that has the minimum logical distance to the host 12. If this server is a
name server (i.e., name server "US" 21e), the root name server 21a redirects a "find
5 nearest session server" request to it as shown in callout 3 of block 21f.

Name server "US" 21e performs the same procedure that the root name
server 21a previously executed by retransmitting a "find nearest session server"
request to one of its child servers 21g that has a minimum logical distance to the
host 12, namely, the name server "IL.US" 21h as shown in callout 4 of block 21i and
10 callout 5 of block 21j. Name server "IL.US" 21h similarly executes a request to each
of its child name servers (not shown) and session servers 21k to calculate the
logical distance as shown in callout 6 of block 21m. This request results in the
"chicago.il.us" server 21n as the server nearest in logical distance to the host 12 in
the example. Since the "chicago.il.us" server 21n is a session server, the request is
15 complete. Thus, the information associated with this session server 21n (i.e., server
ID, IP address and other like information) is returned to the host by way of the name
server "IL.US" 21h via name server "US" 21e and the root name server 21a as
shown in callout 7 of block 21o, callout 8 of block 21p and callout 9 of block 21q.
With this information associated with the session server 21n, the host can send a
20 "register host" request to that session server 21n as shown in callout 10 of block
21r.

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To complete registration, further information relating to the host and its user is transmitted to the host's home session server. This information includes, for example, nickname, current host IP Address, owner ID (only required for secondary host registration), password and other like information. Using this information, the session server creates a unique host ID associated with the host that is stored in its database. The session server sends the host ID to the host where it is stored locally at the host for use associated with subsequent connections to the network. For example, each host is required to send its host ID to the home session server each time it connects to the network in order to identify itself.

The registration information is utilized to locate and access hosts and is stored in data fields associated with the home session server's database 22 as illustrated in Fig. 3. As further illustrated in Fig. 3, the home session server can be utilized for a number of different hosts as indicated in box 22a, box 22b and box 22c.

As previously discussed, the home session server includes a number of different data fields associated with its database 22. The data fields contain a variety of different information relating to the host and its user. For example, the host ID field 24 uniquely identifies the host as previously discussed. A nickname field 26 contains a name associated with the user who owns the host. An IP address field 28 includes IP address information. The status field 30 contains such information as whether the host is offline, online, redirected, moved or other like status information. The type field 32 contains such information as whether the host

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is permanent, transient or other like information. The redirection field 34 contains such information as to where or from where the host has been moved or redirected as discussed in detail below. The owner ID field 36 identifies the owner of the host or the owner's ID. If the owner ID and the host ID are the same, then the host is the
5 primary host of that owner as previously mentioned. The owner terminal field 38 contains information relating to what host the owner is currently logged into.

This field is used only in database records associated with primary hosts. If the owner of the primary host currently is not logged into the network, this field is blank. If the owner is currently logged into its primary host, then the owner terminal
10 field 38 and the host ID field 24 are the same. If the owner terminal field 38 and host ID field 24 are different, then the owner of the primary host is currently logged into the network via a host having a host ID as indicated in the owner terminal field, for example, 01234567@toronto.ca as indicated in box 38a.

Upon completion of the registration procedure, the host also obtains an IP
15 address associated with a secondary home session server. The secondary home session server can be used, for example, in place of the current or primary home session server (i.e., the home session server first contacted during host connection to the network) when the current or primary home session server is inoperable.

Referring back to Fig. 1, the network computer system of the present
20 invention preferably includes data servers 21. These data servers are utilized to download static virtual reality data to hosts, such as three dimensional ("3D") graphics, models, sounds, textures, program modules, scripts or other like data.

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This type of data can be requested by hosts when, for example, creating new virtual reality environments, updating host system data, remotely accessing existing virtual reality environments that are installed on other hosts or other like operations. It should be appreciated that static 3D data, such as 3D model wire frame, graphic textures or other like 3D data, is much larger in size than dynamic 3D data that simply describes the virtual reality environment itself. For example, static 3D data associated with a wooden chair, such as a 3D skeleton which describes the shape of the chair and bitmaps that represent the wood surfaces, will generally be much larger than the dynamic 3D data that describes the chair location within a particular virtual environment (i.e., six numbers that represent a chair position and orientation). This type of data is typically transferred from the data servers 21 as compared to being transferred directly from the host computer 12.

There are two primary advantages of utilizing data servers 21 to access and transmit static 3D data. First, the data servers 21 can transmit this data much faster than if, for example, the data was transferred from another host. The data servers 21 typically have a much faster network connection. Second, the host computer 12 will not then be overloaded with requests to transmit such data (i.e., outgoing network traffic). Thus, the host computer 12 can potentially serve more connecting client host computers.

It should be appreciated that static 3D data is not required to be transferred from the data server 21 to the host computer 12 each time the user wants to access some remotely hosted virtual reality environment. Since this type of data cannot be

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changed by the host owner or any other user, such data is required to be transferred only once to a user's computer. The data is then stored or cached in local storage associated with the host for subsequent use. The next time that the user connects to a remotely hosted virtual reality environment, this data can be transferred from its local storage thereby significantly reducing the time necessary for the user or more appropriately its host to access the virtual reality environment of a certain remote host, that is, the data server is bypassed during this data transmission.

As illustrated in Fig. 4, the name servers 20, session servers 18 and data servers 21 form an architecture hierarchy. This is important for purposes of locating hosts and servers as described below. The base of the hierarchy structure is formed by a number of name servers 20 which are positioned at a variety of different domain levels. In Fig. 4, the name server 20a is at the root of the hierarchy, that is, it is located at the highest domain level. The name server 20b and name server 20c are located at a next highest domain level. The name server 20d and name server 20e are located at the lowest domain level as illustrated in Fig. 4. Once the hierarchy of name servers 20 is established, the session servers 18 and data servers 21 are connected to the various name servers as further illustrated in Fig. 4.

As previously discussed, the computer network system of the present invention includes session servers 18. The session servers are utilized to register hosts as previously discussed. The session servers are also utilized to conduct

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[and direct] all network traffic between communicating hosts. The hosts transmit data to other hosts via interconnected session servers as illustrated in Fig. 5. Data from the host 48 is transmitted through its home session server 50. This data is then transmitted to hosts 54, hosts 56 (via session server 58) and hosts 60 (via
5 session server 62). This is referred to as multi-cast messaging wherein data is transmitted to a number of hosts through a single session server.

The multi-cast messaging function directed from the home session server significantly reduces the host's outgoing network traffic. The host only needs to transfer one message to its home session server 50. This message or data is
10 relayed, communicated or transmitted to a number of other hosts and session servers as illustrated in Fig. 5. The data transmitted directly from the session servers to the hosts is referred to as uni-cast messaging (i.e., data transmitted from session server 50 to host 54), that is, data is transmitted to an individual host.

The reduction in outgoing network traffic sent from the host is critical
15 considering the fact that a host, in general, does not have an efficient Internet connection, particularly when the host is a mobile, personal computer or other system access device as compared to a miniframe or mainframe computer. It should be appreciated that the use of session servers as a gateway to the network for hosts is applicable for hosts computers that have either a wire network
20 connection (i.e., modem) or a wireless network connection.

In addition to reducing outgoing host network traffic, session servers are further utilized to optimize the network connection speed for a particular host. This

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results from the fact that session servers can be located in a number of different geographical regions. Increased network connection speed becomes particularly critical when the user attempts to access the network via a remote host.

For example, the user can access the network via a remote host, such as a
5 mobile or portable computer when the user is out of the user's office or not at the user's local host. In order to facilitate network connection speed, dynamic roaming is utilized to locate a session server (not necessarily the home session server of its local host) nearest the remote host. The dynamic roaming function is diagrammatically illustrated in Figs. 6a, 6b and 6c. In Fig. 6a, a network connection
10 is established between host 64 (i.e., host X) and host 66 (i.e., host Y) via session server 68 and session server 70, respectively. The session server 68 is the home session server of host X and the session server 70 is the home session server of host Y. This illustrates the typical situation where the host establishes a network connection via its home session server.

15 In Fig. 6b, a network communication is established between host X and host Y. Host X attempts to make this connection via session server 68 while host X is located in Europe and the session server 68 is located in the United States. However, this type of network connection results in a decreased network connection speed due to the increased logical distance between host X and session server 68.

20 To increase the network connection speed for this situation, host X is redirected to the session server 70 (i.e., dynamic roaming). Once redirected, host X and host Y communicate via a single session server, namely session server 70.

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This results because session server 70 is the nearest available session server to host X. In general, the nearest available session server can be determined by calculating and comparing the logical distances F_i , where i is a positive integer, between any number of available servers and the host. The logical distance F is a
5 function of the number of hops H between servers and a neighbor server current workload ratio R .

It should be appreciated that other hosts attempting to establish network communication with host X through its home session server (i.e., session server 68) will be informed that host X's session server has been temporarily moved to the
10 session server 70. When host X is redirected, session server's 68 database can be updated with this information by communicating with session server 70. The redirection information is preferably stored in session server's database 68 as illustrated in Fig. 3. For example, the redirection field 34 of the host permanent record associated with the home session server 68 can include information relating
15 to the whereabouts of host X, for example, as indicated in box 34a.

In addition, the host is marked as redirected in the database of its home session server (i.e., session server 68). This appears, for example, in the status field 30 as indicated in box 30a as further illustrated in Fig. 3. Further, the roaming session server (i.e., session server 70) identifies the host as transient in the type
20 field 32 as further illustrated in Fig. 3 and indicated in box 32a and stores the host's home session server name in the redirection field as indicated in box 34b. This signifies that the session server is not the home session server of this host.

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In general, the roaming procedure can be applied when a user cannot find a host under a prior host IP address. For example, dynamic roaming can also be applied to the situation where the primary home session server is inoperable or overloaded such that network sessions are established via the secondary home session server as previously mentioned. The present invention thus enables a user to locate the host although the host has been moved or redirected from its home session server. With this information, the other hosts can establish network communications with the redirected host (i.e., host X) via its roaming session server (i.e., session server 70).

Alternatively, the host can be permanently moved and relocated to another host location (i.e., another session server) as illustrated in Fig. 7. This is referred to as host name aliasing. The session server 72 associated with the old host location (indicated in block 74) identifies this host 75 as being moved as shown in the type field of the session server database indicated in block 76. In addition, this session server's database indicates the new location of the host in the redirection field of its database as further indicated in block 76. The session server 78 associated with the new host location (indicated in box 80) identifies the host 75 as being permanently relocated as shown in the type field of this session server's database as indicated in block 82.

As further illustrated in Fig. 7, the host 75 obtains a new host ID when it is moved to its new location. This type of roaming mechanism can be utilized to preserve host names which were initially associated with some high level domain

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(i.e., name server 84) yet had to be moved to another session server 78 associated with a lower level domain (i.e., name server 86) due to network expansion. Thus, when another host (not shown) attempts to establish network communication with host 75 via the old session server location, it will be prompted with the information
5 that the host 75 has been permanently moved. This host can update its address information relating to the move such that it can contact the new home session server (i.e., session server 78) directly when it again attempts to establish network communications with the host.

It should be appreciated that the host 75 effectively has two names after the
10 move. Host 75 has a primary name (the newly assigned one, i.e., 00005678@alpha.com as indicated in block 80) and a secondary name (the old one, i.e., 00001234@alpha.com as further indicated in block 80) which is used as an alias. Therefore, network communication with the host 75 can be made directly or indirectly by utilizing the primary name and secondary name, respectively.

15 It should be appreciated that session servers of the present invention do not assign IP addresses to hosts. The present invention can operate over the TCP/IP network protocol level which generates the IP addresses. Therefore, the present invention uses these IP addresses.

The IP addresses can be either static (i.e., dedicated line) or dynamic (i.e.,
20 dial-up modem). For example, all servers must have static IP addresses such that hosts can establish TCP/IP connection with servers. With respect to hosts, IP addresses can be both static and dynamic. The session servers store and use host

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IP addresses associated with the servers database only when the host is online as indicated, for example, in the STATUS field 30 of the server's database by the "online" value of block 30b. Otherwise, the IP address is not utilized because hosts obtain new and different IP addresses each time a host goes online.

5 It should also be appreciated that server names do not belong to the world wide web namespace because the present invention does not rely on the existing world wide web [infrastructure or protocol]. In other words, names associated with the servers of the present invention are not associated with a particular web site on the Internet. Dedicated host software and not, for example, web browsers, is utilized
10 to access the virtual reality network of the present invention. Thus, the name system associated with the present invention does not interfere with the existing world wide web name system. The server names, such as "alpha.com" and "chicago.il.us" as previously mentioned, provide illustrative examples of the types of names that can be utilized.

15 As previously discussed, the present invention provides systems and methods for users to communicate and operate within virtual reality environments. The host is a central component of the networked computer system of the present invention because it houses the virtual reality environment such that users can effectively interact with the virtual reality environment to for example, create and
20 customize its personal virtual reality environment, communicate with other users within its personal virtual reality environment or another user's virtual reality

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environment or perform any suitable computer application or function within the virtual reality environment.

In general, one embodiment host 88 is a computer which includes a number of conventional hardware or software computer components such as system random access memory ("system RAM") 90, hard drive 92, input/output devices 94, such as keyboard, mouse, computer display, speakers and other like computer components as illustrated in Fig. 8. The system RAM includes, for example, data 96, code 98 and an operating system (OS) 100 as also shown in Fig. 8. It should be appreciated that the host could be arranged in any other suitable manner in accordance with the present invention.

To properly house the virtual reality environment, the host accounts for the complex structure of the virtual reality environment which includes both virtual reality environment data **[(including static data originally received from the data servers and dynamic data received from other hosts or the memory of the hosts)]** and program code. The data can include for example an active client virtual reality environment as indicated in box 102. The active client virtual reality environment can be transmitted from another host 106 during network communication session. The operation within this virtual reality environment can be viewed on the input/output device 94 by a local user (not shown).

In addition, the data can include an active server virtual reality environment as indicated in box 104. The active server virtual reality environments are permanently stored in the host's hard drive 92 and can be transmitted to remote

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hosts (not shown) via network communication sessions. A detailed discussion of network communication between hosts is provided below.

Before communication and interaction within the virtual reality environment can proceed, the virtual reality environment must be activated. The activation of a virtual reality environment is analogous to opening a locally stored text file with, for example, any suitable data processing software. In this example, the activated virtual reality environment is analogous to the opened text file. In addition, multiple virtual reality environments can be activated at the same time just as multiple text files can be opened by the data processing software.

However, the virtual reality environment is not activated by simply installing it into the system memory. Rather, the virtual reality environment must also be activated by the host software, that is, the host software, for example, runs various scripts, controls the behavior of active objects within the virtual environment, such as robots and program code, handles various event flows, and performs other like operations. The program code includes, for example, a user interface module, a virtual reality environment simulation and control module, a data access and cacheing module or other like virtual reality process modules as indicated in box 108, box 110 and box 112, respectively.

The user interface module 108 can be utilized, for example, to perform visual rendering of current active virtual environments on a computer screen and audio rendering of current active virtual environments on speakers, headphones or other audio devices. It can further be utilized to accept user input, such as a keyboard, a

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mouse or other like input. The user interface module 108 translates this input into appropriate control commands, such as user avatar movements, object control commands, virtual reality environment activating commands, host user login/logout commands and the like. The translated input is sent to the virtual reality
5 environment simulation and control module 110 for execution.

The execution includes a variety of different operations. For example, the virtual reality environment simulation and control module 110 loads and activates in system memory the virtual reality environment that is requested by the user (via the user interface module). To activate the virtual reality environment, the virtual reality
10 environment simulation and control module 110 requests the data access and caching module 112 to provide the necessary static and dynamic virtual reality environment data. [The dynamic virtual reality environment data is used to arrange and update if necessary the static dynamic virtual reality data]. Once activated, the virtual reality environment simulation and control module 110 can execute control
15 commands received from, for example, the local user (via user interface module), remote and network connected hosts (via the data access and caching module or automatically generated commands via active object script routines and environment control routines as a result of the virtual reality simulation process) to run the virtual reality environment.

20 For example, an active object, such as an “automatic door”, can have an assigned scripting routine that causes the automatic door to open each time a user (represented by an avatar) approaches it. Environment control routines include, for

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example, may include geometrical collision detecting routines which prevent interpenetration of object boundaries or other like routines that simulate the laws of nature, such as mechanics, hydrodynamics and the like. The virtual reality environment simulation and control module 110 can also perform any necessary
5 run-time security and privacy checks.

The data access and caching module 112 is utilized to deliver data that is necessary to activate and run the virtual environments as previously discussed. For example, it translates dynamic and static virtual reality data requests from the virtual reality environment simulation and control module 110 associated with network
10 requests from remote hosts and data servers. The data access and caching module 112 can receive and locally store static virtual reality data associated with the host for subsequent use. It can further perform network communication sessions by, for example, transmitting virtual reality control commands between hosts or compiling and sending multicast messages. The data access and caching module can also
15 store and provide secured certified access associated with host owner private data, such as personal address books, passwords and the like.

Once the virtual reality environment(s) is activated on a host, the environment can be accessed and operated by other hosts which are allowed access to such environment as indicated above and further described below.
20 Although several virtual reality environments can be activated on a host acting as an active server, preferably one of the active environments is displayed at one time. This type of active virtual reality environment is referred to as a current active

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environment as further indicated in box 102 of Fig. 8. The remaining active virtual reality environments run in a stealth mode on such host, that is, they remain open or available for other remote users to operate within them. However, the local user cannot view any changes made by the remote users to the active virtual reality environments that run in stealth mode if the local user is working in the current active environment which is viewed on a display screen. The local user may view the active virtual reality environments that run in stealth mode by, for example, viewing them through virtual displays which are located within the current active environment.

It should be appreciated that remote access to locally stored virtual reality environments can be controlled in a variety of different ways. As previously discussed, every host has an owner (i.e., a certain registered user). This provides the owner user with the ability to implement access restrictions for its host as further discussed. For example, the owner user can specify that only active virtual reality environments can be accessed. Alternatively, the owner user can specify that certain users can access non-active virtual reality environments. However, non-active virtual reality environments would have to be opened or activated by the local host upon request of the remote user prior to access by the remote user.

When hosts establish network communication with one another, the terms “client” and “server” are used to describe the relationship between the hosts. In general, the term “server” means a host that locally stores and operates data, and the term “client” means a host that issues a request to access the data hosted by

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the server. For example, when a remote host accesses the active virtual reality environment associated with a local host, the remote host becomes an active client for the local host (i.e., the remote host operates the virtual reality environment in active client mode) while the local host acts as an active server to the remote host.

- 5 As viewed and operated by the remote host, the virtual reality environment is a current active environment.

As applied to the networked computer system of the present invention, one main distinction between a server host and a client host is that only a server host running an active virtual reality environment can modify the permanent data
10 associated with the active virtual reality environment. This data is stored in the server host's local persistent memory (i.e., a hard drive). Direct modifications of remotely hosted virtual reality data (i.e., data hosted by a client host) are preferably not allowed. This protects a host's permanent or locally stored virtually reality data from being modified by remote hosts that run the same virtual reality environments
15 associated with the local host. In other words, the local host has complete control over modifications to its own locally stored virtual reality data. Thus, in order to remotely change this data, the virtual reality environment should be activated from the local host in server mode such that a local or remote user can request the local host to make such changes.

20 It should be appreciated that the present invention does not contemplate the situation where a host acts as both a server and a client for the same activated virtual reality environment. This situation is illustrated in Fig. 9a where host 114

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(host B) acts as both a client for host 116 (host C) and a server for host 118 (host A) with respect to the active virtual reality environment 120.

On the other hand, Fig. 9b illustrates one embodiment of client mode according to the present invention. Host A and host B each act as a client for host C as indicated in block 124 and box 126, respectively, with respect to the active virtual reality environment 120. That is, host A and host B each receive data relating to the virtual reality environment 120 from host C. In turn, host C acts as a server to both host A and host B as indicated in block 122. That is, host C transmits data relating to the virtual reality environment 120 to both host A and host B.

It should be appreciated that a host cannot activate a client virtual reality environment in stealth mode since stealth mode is used only when a host acts as a server for some virtual reality environment such that it allows remote clients to access this environment. In addition, remote clients cannot access a virtual reality environment associated with a certain host which is run in active client mode.

However, a host can act as both a client and a server associated with two or more different virtual reality environments as illustrated in Fig. 10. Host 128 (Host B) acts as a server for host 130 (host A) with respect to the virtual reality environment 132 labeled X as indicated in block 134 and block 136. Alternatively and simultaneously, host B can act a client for host 138 (host C) with respect to the virtual reality environment 136 labeled Y as indicated in block 142.

It should be appreciated that active virtual reality environments can be accessed in a variety of different ways. Figs. 11a through 11d illustrate four such

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examples. In Fig. 11a, the host 144 acts as a server for several active virtual reality environments 146 that run in stealth mode. The remote hosts 148, acting as clients, establish network connections with the host 144 via a session server 150 to access the active virtual reality environments. The virtual reality environments are
5 run as current active client environments 152 on the remote hosts 148 as compared to active server environments 146 running in stealth mode associated with host 144. Thus, the host 144 acts an active server for the remote hosts 148.

In Fig. 11b, a local user 154 monitors the active virtual reality environment 156 running as a current active server environment on the host 158. It also
10 enables the local user 154 to establish a network communication session via the session server 160 with those remote hosts 162 (i.e., users associated with the remote hosts) who currently access the active virtual reality environment associated with the host 158 that functions in active server mode. The virtual reality environments are run as current active client environments 164 on the remote hosts
15 162 as compared to active server environments 156 running as current in host 158.

In Fig. 11c, the host 166 establishes network communications via a session server 168 to access an active virtual reality environment 170 of a remote host 172, acting as a server. Once accessed, the host 166 runs the active virtual reality environment in client mode 174 (i.e., a current active environment) such that it can
20 be viewed and operated on a display 176 by a local user 178.

As illustrated in Fig. 11d, the host 180 acts a both an active client and active server as previously discussed. The host 180 acts a client for the remote host 172

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as illustrated in Fig. 11c. Alternatively and simultaneously, the host 180 acts as a server for the remote hosts 162 as illustrated in Fig. 11b.

It should be appreciated that when a network communication session is established between the local host acting as an active server and remote hosts acting as active clients via a session server, any action(s) performed by a local host user and/or remote host user are transmitted to each of the network connected local hosts and remote hosts. For example, if the virtual reality environment is a home environment, any changes to the home environment performed by a certain host, such as, adding a chair to a certain room within the home environment, are transmitted (as dynamic virtual reality data) to the other hosts in network communication with one another. In addition, any changes to the virtual reality environment resulting from these actions, such as adding the chair to a room, are saved by the local host and stored on the local host persistent (i.e., hard drive and not RAM) memory.

When the host acts as a virtual reality active server, the same copy of the virtual reality environment that is run on the host is shared between all connecting clients, including the host operator (local host user) who can also participate in network communication sessions as illustrated in Fig. 11b. This communication network has certain limitations particularly when the number of session participants is small or large. For example, this type of virtual reality communication network is inefficient with respect to, for example, data transmission speed, due to network connection bandwidth and computational limitations of both server and client

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computers. This situation is typical for those hosts which act as public virtual reality portals that are remotely accessed by a large number of users.

To address these limitations, the present invention provides a host(s) capable of acting as a virtual reality passive server for a remote host(s). In passive server mode, remote hosts (i.e., users of remote hosts) can access virtual reality environments associated with a certain host regardless if these environments are already in active or non-active status. The remote host establishes network communication via a session server with a local host. As a passive server, the local host sends a copy of the virtual reality environment to the remote host upon request from the remote host. **[Does it send static, dynamic or both types of virtual reality environment data]** After which time, direct network communication between the client host (i.e., remote host) and server host (i.e., local host) is terminated. In other words, such server hosts work much in the same way as typical Web servers that send Web pages to Web browsers installed on remote computers.

The remote host then activates and operates the virtual reality environment in passive client mode, that is, the remote host does not communicate with the local host regarding changes made to the "copied" virtual reality environment. In other words, the remote host operates as if it had just activated one of its own locally stored virtual reality environments. The only difference being that the remote host cannot save any changes made to the virtual reality environment. By definition, changes cannot be made in passive client mode. The virtual reality environment is

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only a copy and thus the remote host cannot permanently store any virtual reality data files associated with this virtual reality environment.

Alternatively, the virtual reality environment can be accessed locally in passive mode. The main difference between local and remote access is that the
5 copy of the virtual reality environment is accessed at the local host and not via the network at a remote host. Thus, the local passive server host in this case acts as a passive client for itself. Again, the local user cannot make any permanent changes to the virtual reality environment, just as a remote user, when the virtual reality environment is accessed in passive client mode.

10 It should be appreciated that a virtual reality environment can be accessed in passive server mode in a variety of different ways depending on the access restrictions associated with the local host. For example, a remote user can have the right to permanently save the copy of virtual reality environment at its host. In this situation, the remote user essentially owns this copy of the virtual reality
15 environment and can therefore make and save any changes to it. However, the remote user's saved version of the "copied" virtual reality environment is uniquely identified, that is, it has a different network identifier than the original. The identifier is assigned and registered by the remote host user upon modifying the original copy. This situation is analogous to saving some document file from an Internet site
20 onto to a local computer, that is, at a minimum, the network address of the locally saved document is different than that of the original Internet file.

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Once the modified copy of the original virtual reality environment is permanently saved, the remote host no longer acts in passive client mode with respect to this virtual reality environment. Instead, the remote host acts as an active or passive server.

5 It should be appreciated that passively hosted virtual environments cannot be modified by users, including the owners of hosts associated with such environments. However, the owners of passively hosted virtual environments can access such environments both in active mode and passive mode where active mode is utilized to perform virtual reality environment editing.

10 It should be further appreciated that each remote user who accesses a passively hosted virtual environment obtains its own personal independent copy of the virtual reality environment. Upon access, the remote user generally does not establish network communication sessions with other users within this virtual reality environment. However, a "follow user" mode may be utilized to establish network
15 communication sessions between users who access the passively hosted virtual reality environments as described in detail below.

As previously discussed, a desirable feature of the present invention is to provide users with a computer network system which enables them to establish interactive network sessions such that the user can effectively operate, function and
20 communicate within a variety of different virtual reality environments. In order to effectively establish network communications, the users must be able to effectively locate the users, hosts, virtual reality environments and the like on the network. As

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previously discussed, hosts and user can be registered and assigned unique identifiers for locating purposes. Registration is performed by the host via its home session server which stores a variety of different information associated with the host and its owner as further discussed above and illustrated in Fig. 2.

5 With this information, host, user and other related information can be effectively located by utilizing a locating mode or process, such as a visit user home mode or follow user mode. In visit user home mode, the location task is analogous to locating a certain place. With follow user, the location task is analogous to locating a certain place where a certain person currently resides.

10 As applied to the present invention, visit user home mode is utilized to find a certain host on the network as described below with reference to Fig. 12. For example, a user 182 who is working at host 184 having host ID (12345678@dells.ws.us) wants to establish a network connection with another host 186 having host ID(87654321@chicago.il.us). The host 184 has a home session
15 server 188 that has a domain name "dells.ws.us" as indicated in box 189. In addition, the other host 186 has home session server 190 with a domain name "chicago.il.us" as indicated in box 191.

To locate this host 186, a request is sent to the home session server 188 from host 184. The request identifies the host 186 to be located by its host ID. The
20 home session server 188 compares the domain name part of the requested host name (i.e., the part of the name following the "@" character) and determines that it is not equal to its own domain name. Thus, it knows that the requested host 186 is

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not listed in its own database, and therefore, redirects this request to the upper level domain server, such as name server 192 with a domain name "ws.us" as indicated. This server 192 compares its own domain name with the corresponding part of the requested host name, that is, it compares "ws.us" with "il.us".

5 Because these names are different, the request is redirected to the next upper level domain server, namely, name server 194 with domain name "us" as indicated. At this level, the server domain name ("us") and host domain subname ("us") are equal. The name server 194 attempts to find a server (name or session) within its family of child servers that has the name extension "il", (i.e., the full
10 domain name "il.us"). As shown in Fig. 12, this server is a lower domain level name server 196. The request is redirected to it. The name server 196 performs a similar search and in turn redirects the request to the session server 190 which searches its local database for the host 186 that has the identifier 87654321.

It then reviews this host's status field to determine whether the host is on-line
15 or off-line. If this host is currently online, it sends the IP address of this host 186 and the IP address of itself back to host 184. With this information, network communication can be established between host 184 and host 186.

The IP address of the host 186 session server 190 can be saved in a local database of host 184, such as in an address book. With this saved information, the
20 host 184 can directly contact the other host 186 without having to make another search request for the host 186 session server IP address. It should be appreciated that the host status can include a variety of different information other than whether

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it is "online" or "offline." As further illustrated in Fig. 3, the host status field 30 can include whether it has been "redirected" as indicated in box 30a or "moved" (not shown). If redirected, the host 186 has been temporarily moved to another location. If moved, the host 186 has been permanently relocated and assigned to another
5 session server. Thus, the host 184 would need to contact the newly assigned session server to request the actual host status and IP address of the permanently relocated host session server.

Turning now to Fig. 13, an embodiment of the follow user mode is illustrated. In this example, the user at host 198 (i.e., Host A) wants to establish a network
10 communication with a certain user, namely the owner of the Host B. First, Host A can issue a search request to its session server 200 in order to determine the primary host associated with the home session server of the requested user. This can be done by locating a host which has a host ID that equals the user ID of the requested user (i.e., the user who with network communication is sought). As
15 previously discussed, a host having the same host ID and user ID (owner ID) is a primary host to a user with this user ID.

By locating the primary host 202 (Host B in Fig. 13) and its home session server 204, Host A can request and receive information from the home session server 204 relating to the whereabouts of the requested user as indicated in box
20 206. This information can be retrieved from the owner terminal field 38 (FIG. 3) of Host B's database record which is stored at session server 204. For purposes of this example, the owner terminal field identifies that the requested user is logged

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into Host 208 (Host C). Host B's home session server 204 acquired this information when the requested user first logs into Host C. This information was transmitted to Host B's home session server in order to update the owner terminal field in Host B's database record.

5 With this information, Host A can establish network communications with Host C to further determine how a network communication can be established with the requested user. By establishing network communication with Host C, Host A can issue a follow user mode ("follow mode") request to Host C as indicated in block 210. In follow user mode, Host C can determine, for example, the virtual reality
10 environment and its corresponding host that the requested user is currently accessing. In this example, Host C communicates to Host A that the requested user is currently accessing the virtual reality environment associated with Host 212 (Host D) via Host C as indicated in block 214.

 If, for example, the virtual reality environment that the requested user is
15 accessing is run in active mode, Host D acts as an active server in network communication with Host C acting as an active client for Host D. Thus, Host A can establish network communication with Host D in order to interact with the requested user as indicated in block 216.

 It should be appreciated that, in this example, the requested user cannot be
20 contacted via a network communication with Host C because Host C is an active client. As previously discussed and further illustrated in Fig. 9a, a host cannot act as both a client and a server for the same virtual reality environment.

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If it is assumed, for example, that Host D acts as a passive server as indicated in box 218, Host A must then establish a network communication with Host C in order to interact with the requested user as indicated in box 220. This results because Host D is not in network communication with either Host C or Host

- 5 A. As previously discussed, a passive server (i.e., Host D) discontinues network communication with passive clients (i.e., Host A and Host C) once a copy of the virtual reality environment is transmitted to the passive clients from the passive server.

- 10 By establishing a network connection between Host A and Host C, the server Host D is effectively bypassed. In other words, this situation results in network communication between a group of hosts (i.e., Host A and Host C). This type of network communication is referred to as a symmetric communication channel such that each host of the group can establish a peer-to-peer connection with the other hosts of the group. In this situation, each host contains its own local database
- 15 which includes the IP address of the other hosts.

- Other hosts can join the group of hosts by connecting to one of the hosts of the group, for example, by issuing a follow user mode request as previously discussed. Once connected, the newest host member of the group receives the list of IP addresses of each of the hosts in the group. In turn, the newest member
- 20 sends its IP address to each of the hosts such that each of their group databases can be updated. This type of network connection continues provided that at least two hosts of the group remain in network communication with one another.

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The symmetric communication channel contrasts the situation where network communication between hosts is established through a dedicated or central server. This type of network communication is referred to as asymmetric communication channel. An advantage of the symmetric communication channel is that it is not
5 dependent on a central or dedicated server, that is, this type of network communication exists provided that at least two hosts remain in network connection. However, the asymmetric communication channel ends once the central server terminates the session. This means that the client hosts will no longer have access to the virtual reality environment associated with the dedicated server.

10 Thus, the symmetric communication channel enables a number of relatively small independent user groups to share different and independent copies of a virtual reality environment. For example, three separate user groups 222 can be established between hosts. These groups 222 each contain a copy of a virtual reality environment received from a server host 224 acting in passive mode as
15 illustrated in Fig. 14. As previously discussed, the network connection exists between the passive client hosts and not between the hosts and server. Each of the groups include at least two host group members 226, including at least one group member 228 who initiated the group (i.e., the group initiator). Other hosts can join the group by executing visit user home and follow user location requests as
20 previously discussed. It should be appreciated that the group initiator can leave the group at any time without interrupting the network communication session between

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the remaining group members since each user group is completely symmetric relative to its members.

As previously discussed, "visit user home" and "follow user" access modes may be utilized by host users to travel between different virtual reality environments.

5 To facilitate such travel, the present invention provides a method of continuous group teleportation between virtual environments utilizing "visit user home" and "follow user" access methods as described above. The term "continuous" means that the virtual network communication between the group of users is effectively uninterrupted during teleportation. Thus, the group of users may continue to
10 perform certain networked virtual tasks. For example, a user may be able to view the users, namely, the users' avatars, who participate in the group teleportation process, communicate with them, play games and perform other like virtual tasks.

As applied to the present invention, dedicated entry point objects (entry points) and teleportation objects (teleporters) are utilized to facilitate continuous
15 user group teleportation. In general, an entry point is a closed area located within a virtual reality environment, such as a room or booth. The entry point enables a user(s) to position itself (i.e., its user avatar) within a corresponding teleporter. In turn, teleporters are utilized to teleport a user or a group of users to other virtual environments.

20 Unlike entry points, teleporters include a three dimensional coordinate space created by the host virtual reality software. The teleporter region is located outside of the virtual environment from which the users are teleported. For example,

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teleporters may be located beneath the ground surface of the virtual environment. In this location, the defined space of the teleporter and that of the virtual environment do not intersect. Thus, the teleporter region is not visible to and cannot be entered by the user(s) from within the virtual environment. The teleporter
5 has one or several entry regions upon which entry can be made via adjacent entry point clones.

An entry point clone has an identical structure as that of a corresponding entry point object associated with the virtual environment. However, the entry point clone, like the teleporter, is located outside of the virtual environment. When the
10 user moves its avatar into an entry point area associated with the virtual environment, it is instantly moved to a corresponding entry point clone from which the user may further proceed to the teleporter. It should be appreciated that since entry points and their corresponding clones concurrently exist and are kept in active state within identical three dimensional coordinate space, user avatars may be
15 instantly moved between them. A user can move between entry point and entry point clones in about 1/30 of a second which is comparable to a frame rendering speed.

Teleporters are preferably equipped with a teleportation control panel. This provides the users with an interface to perform teleportation operations. The control
20 panel may be utilized to perform a variety of different operations, such as personal address book access, destination preview feature and teleportation progress visual monitoring system. The teleporter can also include a variety of personal objects,

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such as furniture and the like. The personal objects can be utilized to facilitate virtual communication and interaction within the teleporter.

When a teleportation function is performed, the avatars of all participating users are temporarily locked within the teleporter. This continues until the
5 destination virtual environment, including its entry points and entry point clones, is loaded and activated at each users' host. Thus, teleportation is actually performed in the background mode and does not interrupt the network session between the teleporting users. In other words, all users locked within the teleporter can communicate with each other and interact with other objects located therein.

10 With the destination virtual reality environment loaded and activated at all participating hosts, teleporters associated with the hosts will be connected to entry points via corresponding entry point clones. Thus, the users can exit the entry points via the entry point clones into the destination virtual environment.

It should be appreciated that teleporters are generally not viewed by users
15 within the virtual environment. Therefore, the teleporters are generally not designed to fit any particular virtual environment which users are teleported to or from. This function is effectively accomplished by the entry point objects which may be designed in many different ways both from inside and outside the virtual environment depending on the particular qualities of each virtual reality
20 environment. Thus, visual compatibility between entry points associated with the destination virtual environment and teleporters is only required along respective

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adjacent surfaces. This greatly simplifies design requirements which are necessary to achieve compatibility.

Turning now to Figs. 15 through 17, an embodiment of continuous group teleportation is illustrated. Fig. 15 demonstrates an example of a location of each of
5 an entry point, its clone and a connected teleporter object relative to a virtual reality environment within three dimensional coordinate space. Entry point 300 is located on the virtual environment ground surface 306. Users 305 may enter the entry point object 300 through the door 304. From inside the entry point object 300, a user avatar(s) is moved to a corresponding entry point clone 301 which is located
10 beneath the virtual environment ground surface 306. The entry point clone is geometrically adjacent to a teleporter 302. The user may move the avatar between the entry point clone area and the teleporter area through a door (not shown) located on the region 303 that separates the entry point clone 301 from the teleporter 302.

15 The details of user avatar movement from an entry point object to its clone and further to a teleporter are illustrated in Fig. 16. Entry point object 300 is divided into two adjacent subareas, namely, neutral area 310 and transfer area 311 which are connected through an invisible surface 312. The corresponding entry point clone 301 exists as an exact copy of the original entry point 300 except that the
20 neutral area and the transfer area are inverted relative to each other. In other words, the neutral area 314 within the clone 301 corresponds to the transfer area 311 within the original entry point 300, and the transfer area 313 of the clone 301

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corresponds to the neutral area 310 of the original entry point 300. The area 313 and the area 314 are connected through an invisible surface 315 which has the same coordinate position as the surface 312.

When a user moves its avatar from the neutral area 310 of the original entry
5 point object to the transfer area 311, it is instantly moved to the same coordinate
position within the neutral area 314 of the clone. At this stage, the user can move
the avatar directly into the teleporter 303 through the door 316 or can return to the
neutral area 310 of the entry point object 300 by moving the avatar to the transfer
area 313 of the clone. To provide the same interior look of the entry point object 300
10 and its clone 301, the visual images of the door 319 and the door 320 are added to
each object. It should be appreciated that the user's avatar can never reach these
doors since it is instantly transferred to a conjugate object whenever it tries to
approach them from the neutral area. As also illustrated in Fig. 16, the teleporter
object 302 is equipped with a teleportation control panel object 317, an emergency
15 exit 318 and other optional objects 319.

The emergency exit 318 may be utilized by users to leave the teleporter after
teleportation has started. This may be necessary, for example, when a particular
user decides not to be teleported or when a user's host has a faulty network
connection which would make it impossible for other users in the group to
20 accomplish the teleportation process. When a user leaves the teleporter area
through emergency exit, the network connection between its host and the hosts of
the other users participating in group teleportation is interrupted. The user avatar is

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5 moved to a pre-defined system emergency teleportation capsule (not shown). This area is similar to a regular teleporter, although it only includes a teleportation control panel inside. It should be appreciated that group teleportation via emergency teleportation capsules is impossible since each user that passes through an emergency exit obtains his own personal copy of the capsule.

10 The teleportation control panel 317 is utilized for the selection of a destination virtual reality environment and teleportation process control. The layout of the teleportation control panel is further illustrated in Fig. 17. The control panel can include a display screen 330 and control buttons 331 to 341. The button 331 and button 332 are used to display a list of respective places and people from a user's personal address book as shown in Figs. 18a and 18b. The user can select a place or person from the list 351 or enter it manually in the field 352. By selecting a place, the user instructs the system to perform teleportation in "visit user home" mode. By selecting a person, the user instructs the system to perform teleportation
15 in "follow user" mode.

When a place or a person is selected, the informational page associated with the destination virtual environment is displayed on the screen as shown in Fig. 18c. The page contains general information about the destination virtual reality environment. This information is downloaded from the home session server of the
20 host at which the destination virtual environment is stored. Informational pages are preferably stored in XML or other analogous data format. Thus, these pages are similar to conventional Web pages.

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Since informational pages are stored on the session servers, they are available to users, regardless of whether the corresponding host is online or offline. The virtual reality environment informational page can include a variety of different information. It preferably contains a description 361, a list of available entry points
5 362, an availability status (i.e., open or closed) 363 and other like data. A general information view of the destination virtual reality environment may be selected by pressing the "Info" button 333. Pan scrolling of the information page content can be conducted via a set of buttons 338.

Before teleporting to the selected virtual reality environment, a user may
10 specify an entry point corresponding to the destination virtual environment. The desired entry point may be selected from the list 362 of entry points that are available on the general information page. Another entry point selection method is provided via an interactive map as shown in Fig. 18d. The map view may be selected on the control panel screen 330 by pressing the "Map" button 334. A
15 standard set of zoom control (335a and 335) and pan scrolling (338) functions are provided. If the user does not specify an entry point, a default (main) entry point is selected automatically by the system.

As illustrated in Fig. 18d, a virtual reality environment map indicates the locations of all available entry points 371, locked entry points 372, main entry points
20 373 and other like information. It can also indicate the current location of the user avatar 374 within the virtual environment if a "follow user" teleportation method was selected by the user as discussed above.

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By pressing the "Preview" button 336 (Fig. 17), the user may switch to a panoramic screenshot of the destination virtual reality environment (Fig. 18e) as it is seen from a selected (or main by default) entry point through a virtual video camera located on top of it. Pan scrolling buttons 338 are used to rotate the virtual camera
5 around its axis. It should be appreciated that the panoramic view feature does not require the destination virtual environment to be loaded and activated on a user's host since it is only a small-size static 360-degree screenshot of the three dimensional scene taken from the entry point position.

Buttons 339 through 341 are used for teleportation control. The
10 "Lock/Unlock" button 339 is used to close and/or open doors 316 (Fig. 16) into a teleportation area. This restricts access of other users into it. The "Start/Stop" button 341 starts and/or stops the teleportation process. The "Return" button 340 can be utilized to return to the virtual reality environment from where teleportation was initiated.

15 After a user has pressed the "Start/Stop" button 341, the control panel screen 330 will be switched to the teleportation progress display mode as shown in Fig. 18f. This display mode may be selected at any time by depressing the "Progress" button 337.

It should be appreciated that a teleportation control panel may be used only
20 by one user at a time. However, all other users participating in group teleportation may watch certain actions performed by the user currently working with the panel. Visibility of each display mode by other users may be changed by the user currently

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working with the panel by pressing the “Options” button 342 (Fig. 17) and selecting an appropriate visibility settings (not shown). The help button 343 (Fig. 17) can be utilized to provide a set of instructions relating to the teleportation process.

After moving a user avatar into the teleporter, a user may capture and
5 activate the teleportation control panel object. This can be done by a variety of different ways, preferably by double clicking the mouse button over it. Once captured, the teleportation control panel object automatically moves the user avatar towards it and places the avatar in front of the panel so the user may see the panel in full screen. The panel object remains locked with respect to use by the other
10 users entering the teleportation area, that is, the other users are not allowed to capture the panel unless the panel is released. The user who currently operates the panel may release it by a variety of ways, preferably by double clicking the mouse button at any point outside the panel.

An embodiment of the network dynamics associated with group teleportation
15 is shown in Figs. 19a, 19b and 19c. In this example, it is assumed that that the departure virtual environment and the destination virtual environment are hosted in active server mode. Turning to Fig. 19a, the departure virtual reality environment is stored at the server host 381 and accessed by users at the remote client host 382a, the remote client host 382b, the remote client host 382c, the remote client host
20 383a, the remote client host 383b and the remote client host 384. Thus, the host 381, the remote client host 382a, the remote client host 382b, the remote client host

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382c, the remote client host 383a, the remote client host 383b and the remote client host 384 establish a network session via an asymmetric communication channel.

Similarly, the destination virtual reality environment is stored at the server host 391 and accessed by users at the remote client host 392a, the remote client host 392b and the remote client host 392c. The users of host 383a, host 383b and host 384 form the group 385. This group 385 is to be teleported to the destination virtual environment such that the user avatars are located inside the teleportation object. Furthermore, the user at host 384 operates the teleportation control panel. In other words, the host 384 acts as an initiator of the teleportation process.

When a user of host 384 initiates the teleportation procedure (by pressing "Start/Stop" button 341 Fig. 17), client host 383a, client host 383b and client host 384 are disconnected from the server host 381 to form an independent group 400 as it is further illustrated in Fig. 19b. This establishes a network session between each of the users of the group via a symmetric communication channel. In this example, host 384 acts as group initiator. It should be appreciated that any host may leave the group at any time without interrupting the network connection between the remaining other hosts since host 383a, host 383b and host 384 are interconnected via a symmetric network scheme. As previously discussed, the host user may leave the group by utilizing an emergency exit.

After the user group 400 is created, host 383a, host 383b and host 384 issue a request to download data associated with the destination virtual reality environment. Dynamic data is downloaded from the server host 391. Static data is

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downloaded from a corresponding data server (not shown). Furthermore, host 384 sends to the server host 391 a notification message to lock the entry point selected at the destination environment by the user of host 384 such that it cannot be used for teleportation by another host or group of hosts during this time. As long as the
5 required data is downloaded to the hosts, the hosts can continue to exchange download progress messages between each other which are displayed on the control panel screen as shown in Fig 18f.

Fig. 19c illustrates the situation when a download of destination virtual reality data to the host 383a, host 383b and host 384 is complete. At this moment, the
10 host 383a, host 383b and host 384 are connected to the server host 391 as its clients. The entry point object at the destination virtual environment is unlocked and, thus, the users may move their avatars into the destination virtual environment.

[Need to add distributed data search system.]

It will be understood that modifications and variations may be effected
15 without departing from the scope of the novel concepts of the present invention, and it is understood that this application is to be limited only by the scope of the appended claims.

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CLAIMS

The invention is hereby claimed as follows:

1. A virtual reality networked computer system for enabling a plurality of
5 users to interact in a virtual reality environment, said system comprising:
a plurality of hosts each adapted to each store at least one virtual reality
environment;
a plurality of servers interconnected with the hosts, the servers storing and
transmitting an amount of data associated with the hosts;
10 means for locating the hosts;
means for activating the virtual reality environments associated with the
hosts; and
means for accessing the virtual reality environment.
- 15 2. The system of Claim 1, wherein the servers include a plurality data
servers for storing and transmitting an amount of static virtual reality data.
3. The system of Claim 1, wherein the servers include a plurality of
session servers for storing and transmitting the data associated with the hosts to
20 locate and access the hosts.

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4. The system of Claim 3, wherein the session servers include a plurality
of databases for updating the data.

5. The system of Claim 1, wherein the servers include a plurality of name
5 servers for storing and transmitting an amount of data associated with a plurality of
session servers and a plurality of data servers.

6. The system of Claim 5, wherein the data includes a session server
name, a session server IP address and a session server routing information.

10

7. The system of Claim 1, which includes means for assigning access
restrictions to the hosts.

8. The system of Claim 1, which includes means for registering the hosts
15 and the users.

9. The system of Claim 1, wherein the virtual reality environment is run in
an active mode between a plurality of client hosts and server hosts.

20 10. The system of Claim 9, wherein the client hosts and the server hosts
establish a continuous network communication with one another.

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11. The system of Claim 9, wherein the server hosts transmit an amount of dynamic data of the virtual reality environment associated with the server hosts to the client hosts.

5 12. The system of Claim 11, wherein a host simultaneously functions as a server host and a client host relative to a plurality of different virtual reality environments.

10 13. The system of Claim 1, wherein the virtual reality environment is run in a passive mode between the client hosts and the server hosts.

14. The system of Claim 13, wherein the server hosts transmit a copy of the virtual reality environment associated with the server hosts to the client hosts.

15 15. The system of Claim 14, wherein a network communication between the client hosts and the server hosts is discontinued after the copy of the virtual reality environment is transmitted to the client hosts.

20 16. A method for users to interact within a virtual reality environment, said method comprising the steps of:

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providing a plurality of hosts and servers interconnected with the hosts
wherein the servers store and transmit data associated with the hosts and the hosts
store and transmit the virtual reality environment associated with each host;

locating the hosts by utilizing the data associated with the servers;

5 establishing a network communication between the hosts;

activating the virtual reality environment associated with the hosts; and

accessing the virtual reality environment.

17. The method of Claim 16, which includes the step of performing a
10 plurality of computer applications within the virtual reality environment.

18. The method of Claim 16, which includes the step of creating and
customizing a personal virtual reality environment.

15 19. The method of Claim 18, wherein the personal virtual reality
environment is a home environment.

20. The method of Claim 16, which includes the step of establishing the
network communication between the users within the virtual reality environment.

20

21. The method of Claim 16, which includes the step of performing
dynamic host roaming.

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22. The method of Claim 16, which include the step of performing host name aliasing.

5 23. The method of Claim 16, wherein the locating step includes locating the hosts in follow user mode.

24. The method of Claim 16, wherein the locating step includes locating the hosts in visit user home mode.

10

25. The method of Claim 16, wherein the network communication step includes establishing the network communication by multi-cast messaging.

15 26. The method of Claim 16, wherein the network communication step includes establishing the network communication by uni-cast messaging.

27. The method of Claim 16, wherein the activating step includes activating the virtual reality environment between the hosts in an active mode.

20 28. The method of Claim 16, wherein the activating step includes activating the virtual reality environment between the hosts in a passive mode.

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29. The method of Claim 16 which includes the step of registering the
hosts and users.

30. A method of registering hosts and users within a virtual reality
5 networked computer system comprising the steps of:
establishing a network communication between a plurality of hosts and
servers;
issuing a plurality of registration requests from the hosts to the servers;
transmitting the registration requests between the servers;
10 locating the servers nearest to the registering hosts and users;
assigning identifiers to the hosts and the users;
transmitting an amount of informational data from the hosts and users to the
nearest located servers; and
updating a plurality of databases associated with the nearest located servers
15 with the informational data.

31. The method of Claim 30, which includes the steps of transmitting the
registration requests from a plurality of higher level name servers to a plurality of
lower level name servers and session servers until the session servers nearest to
20 the registering hosts are located.

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32. A method of locating users and hosts within a virtual reality networked computer system, said method comprising the steps of:

issuing a plurality of location requests from a plurality of hosts to a plurality of servers;

5 transmitting the location requests from a plurality of lower level domain servers to a plurality of higher level domain servers until the hosts each having a host name associated with the location requests are located;

establishing a network communication with the hosts;

determining a location of the users; and

10 establishing a network communication with the users via the hosts associated with users.

33. The method of Claim 32, which includes the step of locating the hosts in a visit user mode.

15

34. The method of Claim 32, wherein the step of determining the location of the users includes determining the location in a follow user mode.

35. A method of operating a virtual reality environment in an active mode
20 within a networked computer system, said method comprising the steps of:

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establishing a network communication between a plurality of client hosts and server hosts via a plurality of servers each associated with the client hosts and the server hosts;

activating the virtual reality environment associated with the server hosts;

5 transmitting the virtual reality environment from the server hosts to the client hosts;

interacting within the virtual reality environment; and

continuing the network communication between the client hosts and the server hosts.

10

36. The method of Claim 35, wherein at least one of a client host and server host simultaneously function as both a client host and a server host relative to a plurality of different virtual reality environments.

15

37. The method of Claim 35, wherein the activating and transmitting steps further include activating and transmitting the virtual reality environment in a stealth mode.

38. The method of Claim 35, which includes the step of activating the
20 transmitted virtual reality environment in a current active mode.

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39. A method of operating a virtual reality environment within a networked computer system in a passive mode, said method comprising the steps of:

establishing a network communication between a plurality of client hosts and server hosts via a plurality of servers associated with the client hosts and the server
5 hosts;

transmitting a copy of the virtual reality environment associated with the server hosts from the server hosts to the client hosts;

discontinuing the network communication between the client hosts and the server hosts; and

10 activating the transmitted copy of the virtual reality environment at the client hosts.

40. The method of Claim 39, which includes creating a plurality of user groups by establishing the network communication between the client hosts.

15

41. A method of temporarily relocating hosts within a virtual reality networked computer system, said method comprising the steps of:

establishing a network communication between a plurality of hosts and home session servers associated with the hosts;

20 calculating a logical distance between the hosts and the home session servers;

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calculating a logical distance between the hosts and a plurality of session servers in geographic proximity to the hosts;

redirecting the hosts to the session servers other than the home session servers if the logical distance between the hosts and the home session servers is
5 greater than the logical distance of at least one of the session servers in network proximity to the hosts; and

updating the home session servers with an amount of information associated with redirecting the hosts.

10 42. A method of permanently relocating hosts within a virtual reality networked computer system, said method comprising the steps of:

establishing a network communication between a plurality of hosts and home session servers associated with the hosts;

moving the hosts to the session servers other than home session servers
15 during a network expansion; and

updating home session servers with an amount of information associated with moving the hosts.

20 43. A method of teleporting hosts between a plurality of virtual reality environments, said method comprising the steps of:

creating a host group associated with a departure virtual reality environment containing at least one host;

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establishing a continuous network communication between each of the hosts associated with the host group;

identifying a destination virtual reality environment;

transmitting an amount of data from a server host associated with the
5 destination virtual reality environment to each of the hosts of the host group; and

establishing a network connection between the server host and the hosts of the host group within the destination virtual reality environment.

44. The method of Claim 43, which includes the steps of causing each of
10 the hosts of the host group to access a teleporter via an entry point and a corresponding entry point clone each associated with the departure virtual reality environment; and establishing the continuous network communication between the hosts of the host group each located within the teleporter.

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ABSTRACT

The present invention relates to interactive virtual reality networked computer systems and methods that facilitate communication and operation in a virtual reality environment. The virtual reality networked computer system has an infrastructure
5 that includes a number of users, hosts and servers. The interconnected hosts and servers allow users to effectively locate, activate, access and interact within virtual reality environments in a variety of different ways. For example, users can establish user groups such that interaction within the virtual reality environment occurs between hosts (accessed by users) without the need of a central or dedicated
10 server.